



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SECTION

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WOMEN'S INITIATIVES IN AFRICAN FOOD SECURITY

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination.)

On 15 November 1990, Ms. Gloria Adwoa Nitkwe, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Akuapem Rural Bank, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ghana, briefed NGO representatives on women's initiatives in African food security.

In the 1960s, Africa was a net food exporter, but by 1985, the continent was importing two fifths of its food. For example, in the Sahel, population grew at the rate of 2.5 per cent in the early 1980s, but its food production rose by only 1 per cent. By recognizing the significant role women play in the production of food, the international community can help develop policies and programmes to promote domestic food security and to prevent widespread starvation and malnutrition in Africa.

International economic pressure discourages domestic food production

Women's initiatives in African food security have to be discussed in relation to domestic and international economics, Ms. Nitkwe said. Most African countries depend on exporting a narrow range of primary commodities for their foreign exchange earnings. Sharply declining prices in these commodities have led to significant financial losses. According to Ms. Nitkwe, from 1981 to 1986, losses in earnings for non-fuel primary commodities were estimated to be approximately US\$70 billion, or nearly two thirds of such earnings in 1980. Adverse trade terms and rising debt result, she said.

According to Ms. Nitkwe, African economies are structured primarily to provide raw materials to the market economies of the industrialized nations. African economies are characterized by low production (especially in the dominant agricultural sector), heavy dependence upon imports for domestic production, high food imports, and failure to diversify. Disproportionate resources are spent on research, financing and marketing of cash crops, rather than on producing food for domestic use. Ms. Nitkwe said that other constraints on African food security include inequality between the sexes, and over-emphasis on the development of urban rather than rural areas. She said that banking systems tend to serve large import-export enterprises and are therefore irrelevant to the financial needs of the majority of the African population.

Ms. Nitkwe said that conventional structural adjustment policies perpetuate economic stagnation. If such strategies encourage borrowing to increase production of commodities, then reduced foreign exchange receipts are likely to be the result. Borrowing to purchase food would increase debt, and debt-service payments would deplete resources for development.

Social and economic conditions are deteriorating in Africa

Ms. Nitkwe said these policies have led to deteriorating social and economic conditions in Africa. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) estimates that per capita income in Africa has declined by an annual average of 3 per cent, from 1980 to 1988. Real wages also declined by an average of 19 per cent in the 1980s, accompanied by sharp rises in unemployment. Ms. Nitkwe estimates that some 30 million Africans are unemployed, while over 95 million Africans--especially in rural areas--are "underemployed". Moreover, 70 per cent of Africans are affected by poverty, especially small farmers, women, single heads of households and youths.

Adverse political, economic and social conditions in Africa have also led to a "brain drain": the ECA estimates that 70,000 middle- or high-level Africans have recently migrated from Africa. In addition, wars and civil strife have produced 5 million refugees and an equal number of displaced people in Africa, the largest number in the world. Most are women and children.

Food "insecurity" has resulted from these constraints. In 1980, Africa imported US\$6 billion in grain, primarily wheat which is needed for flour and bread. Ms. Nitkwe said that radical changes in domestic and international structures are needed to achieve food security, because delays in wheat shipments often lead to starvation.

The role of women in promoting African food security

According to Ms. Nitkwe, nearly three quarters of the food produced in Africa is grown by women, who comprise over 50 per cent of the population. Women engage in many aspects of food production, ranging from weeding and harvesting to storage, preservation, processing and marketing. Poultry farming, pig rearing, and horticultural activities are some of the activities performed by women in Africa. Others include cooking, caring for children, and collecting water, fuel wood, and fodder. It is estimated that African women spend 15 to 18 hours a day performing these activities.

In almost all African countries, more women than men live in rural areas. Women comprise much of the labour force and are often the head of the household. Many, however, are illiterate, and few are enrolled in formal educational institutions. In addition, women in Africa often face discrimination when seeking land, credit, and vital services. Ms. Nitkwe said that many African women must use rudimentary tools, because of poor access to technology. These constraints often result in low productivity and low incomes for women.

Domestic economic policies must recognize the contributions of women

Many African countries maintain economic policies which tend to favour large-scale producers and thus neglect women, who typically engage in smaller-scale economic activities and are often self-employed. Women's significant but informal contributions to agriculture, the household, and the family, are not commonly defined by economists as "work." Women's work is therefore not officially assigned any economic value, nor is it reflected in national accounts. Ms. Nitkwe recommended establishing data-bases on women's role in the economy. She also suggested that economic statistics be collected by gender and age, in order to measure the tremendous contributions made by women.

It is also difficult for African women to acquire credit. Women's economic activities are often not only small-scale, but also seasonal and mobile. In addition, cultural traditions prevent some African women from owning real property, which is usually required as collateral by formal financial institutions. Ms. Nitkwe also emphasized that African women farmers and entrepreneurs need affordable machinery and equipment.

In order to promote greater food security, policymakers must recognize the unique needs of African women. Providing rural water supplies, wood lots, health and day-care centres can help make the African population more efficient and productive, by reducing time-consuming tasks. Banks and other lending institutions can try to establish targets for lending to women. Ms. Nitkwe said that establishing new financial institutions to lend only to women would only further marginalize women's needs and concerns.

How non-governmental organizations can help promote African food security

Non-governmental organizations and other concerned institutions can help achieve food security by promoting the status of women. Ms. Nitkwe also recommended that more attention be paid to economic issues and to the work of the Second Committee of the General Assembly.. Such issues include the formation of international development strategies, the establishment of a "new international economic order", and highlighting the situation of developing countries through the United Nations Development Decades.

Ms. Nitkwe also recommended that non-governmental organizations co-operate closely with the African government. Some 51 national agencies have been established by African governments in order to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sex and to promote the integration of African women in development. However, many of these agencies have no clear relationship with ministries of finance or planning, or with other government offices who are promoting rural development.

Enhanced co-operation between the NGO community and government will help to inform rural women about available resources and services. Specific roles to be played by NGOs include bringing the needs, priorities and concerns of women to the attention of national planners, as well as monitoring the implementation of policies at the grass-roots level.

According to Ms. Nitkwe, governments have reached consensus on the nature of the crisis facing Africa and how it can be solved. They have also made commitments on the highest levels to improve the status of women and to promote the productivity of women working in the food sector. Nevertheless, Ms. Nitkwe said, a gap exists between commitment and action. Non-governmental organizations and other concerned parties can help to overcome that gap and thus promote food security for Africa.